

The Waiting by orphan_account

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Summary:

On paper, she had always been his; what an odd notion. She had always belonged to him and to Terry Ives both, the product of some phantom one-night stand. She had never been delivered from the maternity ward to the arms of a sadist who would spend the next twelve years dashing her fragile psyche against the whetstone of Hawkins National Laboratory. It was the life she should have had; the life he was determined to give her, even if he still had eight more months to keep her out of sight.

1. Jane

Author's Note:

Because found families formed from fractured people are my crack and "Jane Hopper" was literally all I wanted from season one.

She holds the birth certificate in trembling hands, as if she's afraid it'll crumble to dust at any second, and with it her equally fragile hopes. He understands the feeling. Everything is hard won with them, and even when it's in writing it feels ephemeral, subject to revocation or destruction by eldritch horrors.

"Jane," she mouths her name one syllable at a time. "Hop-per."

"You okay with that, kid?"

She beams like the sun on water, and he returns the smile, feeling something unclench in his chest. That had been his irrational fear--that she would shout *no, I don't want you*; that she might choose a catatonic mother or band of black-clad MTV rejects over him. But no, she wants this just as much as he does.

"I know we haven't really talked about names," Jim concedes as he crosses over to the turntable, looking through a stack of aging vinyl sleeves for the one he's had in mind all the ride home. "I mean, I know your friends still call you El, and--you know, you can still go by that. That's fine. It's up to y--"

"Jane," she repeats, lightly tracing the box on the certificate. "Is the name. Mama gave me."

"That's right," he says. There it is--*Freedom at Point Zero*. There would be time, eventually, for him to educate her on the merits of Airplane versus Starship, but not now. He touches the needle to the groove, noting her initial confusion at the sound, then her amusement at what he was aware was a powerfully dorky attempt at gyrating to the music. Dad dancing.

*Jane, you say it's all over
For you and me, girl
There's a time for love
And a time for lettin' it be, baby*

He wishes he had a camera around at that moment to capture her face. She has never had her name--her proper name, not the number branded into her skin--sung back to her before. There are so many small things she has never had the luxury of experiencing, things that every other child would take for granted. Things he knows he took for granted with Sara. He won't make that mistake again.

First, however...he has to broach the subject of his conversation with Owens.

"Jane, Jane, Jane," he croons along with the record, as she dissolves into giggles, and he decides to wait, just a little bit longer.

2. The Waiting

*Every day you get one more yard
You take it on faith, you take it to the heart
The waiting is the hardest part*

He waits until supper that evening--pizza, to soften the blow, but all cheese and veggie, in concordance with his new resolution to limit cured meats to no more than two servings a week. He blames Flo for that. *You can't reduce your stress, but you can change your habits*, she'd scolded as she'd all but knocked the bear claw out of his hand the other day. *You want to have a triple bypass before you're fifty?* He had not, as of yet, managed to reduce his overall number of cigarettes smoked per day, but at least he was reserving the Schlitz for evening meals and special occasions.

She's halfway into her second slice, strings of mozzarella dangling from her chin, when he decides to just drop it, to get it out of the way.

"Owens thinks...we should wait another year."

Her hand freezes in midair, the crust wobbling in her tightening grip, as her eyes fix on him, pupils dilating. The half-empty can of Schlitz starts to skitter across the tabletop.

"No," she says forcefully, as if that decides the matter. He takes a deep breath. The last time this happened, he ended up a victim of psionic whipping with whipped cream smeared across the crotch of his uniform trousers.

"I agree. That's too long. So I asked for a few concessions."

The can stops skittering, but she remains frozen in the same tableau, melted cheese still swaying from the partially bitten slice in her hand. Encouraged, he presses forward.

"One, that you get to go to the Snow Ball with your friends, this year."

Jane finally relaxes, lowers her pizza slice to the greasy paper plate, a slow smile spreading across her face. He'd thought it was a small concession, but he forgets that she's never been to a party, let alone a dance. A memory, unbidden, floats to the front of his mind, that of sitting in an office reeking of antiseptic, listening to a squat and mustachioed funeral director direct him and Diane to choose a dress and shoes to bury their daughter in, and thinking then how she would never have a prom dress. *Every kid should go to their fucking prom*, he had thought, and had had to quell the sudden urge to hurl the tacky glass paperweight on the man's desk into his blathering mouth.

He blinks, shakes it off, takes another sip of Schlitz. Jane is still smiling, which makes it harder for him to press on.

"Second...I think that next year, when the new school year starts, you should be able to start high school with your friends, too. That's less than a year. That's the beginning of September."

Her face relaxes, now pensive and faraway as she ponders this. "High...school."

"You've never been to school, so you have a lot of catching up to do. So this is the plan. I get the state-approved curricula, get you some books from the library, and from now until next September, that's what you work on. Getting caught up."

"Caught...up," she repeats, furrowing her brow.

"You know. Knowing all the same stuff as the other kids. I think you can do it. What do you think?"

She looks down at the congealing slice on her plate for a moment, considering it, then back up at him. "Can I still see them?"

He should have known this wasn't going to be negotiable. Especially when it came to Mike Wheeler. Thank God the kid was still a nerd who preferred D&D to *Playboy* and not a burgeoning horndog like he'd been at thirteen. "We'll...figure something out. It'll have to be under cover of darkness. I'll be dropping in on the Byers' from time to time, so you can come with me. They can meet you over there. Not the Wheelers' house, though. Last thing I need is Ted Wheeler reporting me for un-American activities."

"You and Joyce." She says this so casually, right before tucking back into her pizza slice, that it catches him off guard. The last of the Schlitz ends up dribbling down the front of his shirt.

"...What about me and Joyce?"

She says nothing, only smiles impishly, then levitates a stray sliver of mushroom from her plate back to her pizza. They'll have to have a talk about inappropriate use of psionic power in public too, but baby steps, he reminds himself.

"Well?" he asks, clearing his throat to try and regain his composure. "Do we have a deal?"

His daughter--*his daughter*--looks up at him, meets his eyes, and smiles. "Deal."

3. Bloody Well Right

*Write your problems down in detail
Take them to a higher place
You've had your cry - no, I should say wail
In the meantime hush your face*

He's lying in that hazy halfway place between waking and dreaming when his mind wanders to Joyce, as it tends to do more and more lately in these rare unguarded moments when it doesn't have to focus on anything in particular.

Sometimes it's Joyce at sixteen, in saddle shoes and a full skirt with her slip peeking out from underneath, cigarette smoke wafting around her head as she bobs it in time to "Tequila" blaring from the Oldsmobile's radio. He remembers that Joyce smelling like Blue Waltz perfume from the five and dime, dabbing it behind her ears at her locker between classes. He remembers tasting the bubblegum that she'd shift to one cheek when he kissed her. That Joyce fades out, much like he did when Lonnie Byers first came swaggering into her field of view.

Usually, it's Joyce as she is now. Joyce in her polyester smock from Melvald's, her hair frazzled, her fine features fraught as her fingers grasp a cigarette. Tired and ragged and sad, tempered by so much loss and fear. Just like him. She'd been better at holding it together longer, for her boys' sake, but Will's disappearance had split that facade wide open. Now she just waits for the other shoe to drop, for catastrophe to strike again and threaten to steal everything she loves. He wonders what's going to happen when Jonathan goes away to college, if he goes at all--if he doesn't stay around just to keep an eye on his brother and keep his mother from falling apart. *He deserves more than that. They all do.*

He emerges from this reverie when he hears the soft clatter of Jane climbing out of bed, her muffled footsteps shuffling down the hall to

the bathroom, and turns over on his side, ready to let sleep overtake him.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Jim bolts upright and out of bed in two seconds flat in the direction of her bloodcurdling screams, colliding with the doorframe on his way into the hall. "*Jane!*" he shouts, rattling the knob with one hand as he rubs the sore side of his head with the other. "What's wrong? What is it? Tell me!"

"BLOOD!" Jane shrieks from behind the door.

Blood? The image of her bloodied nose comes to mind, and for a split second he wonders if she's been trying to place late-night psychic hotline calls to Mike Wheeler again--when he remembers where she is. "Uh...Jane, honey?" he asks, feeling curiously lightheaded. "Is the blood...in your pants?"

A quiet sob, followed by a loud snuffle. "Yes."

He leans heavily against the door, buries his face in his hands, laughing silently, so hard his shoulders shake. "It's--it's okay. It's okay. You're fine, I promise. This is--totally normal."

She's silent on the other side of the door, no doubt trying to reconcile this new information with the carnage in her pajama bottoms. "Normal?"

"Yes. It's--" It's one in the morning, and he is not up to giving a lecture on the female reproductive system at this particular moment. "We'll talk about it tomorrow. And I'll get you something at the store that will help with it. In the meantime, I'll, uh...give me just a minute."

This is what a mom is supposed to do, he thinks as he forages half-blindly in the linen closet for a clean washcloth. *Which...is you.*

4. Mothers Talk

*Don't you feel your luck is changing
When everything starts to happen
Put your head right next to my heart
The beat of the drum is the fear of the dark*

Joyce blinks twice as Hopper drops the white and blue box with script lettering on the countertop. For a split second, she wonders why he's switching to filtered slims, until the lettering registers in her brain: *Stayfree Silhouettes Maxi*.

"Oh," Joyce said, her lower lip wobbling in suppressed amusement. "How did you explain that one?"

Hop sighs and shakes his head. "I haven't, yet. I was going to do it over breakfast, and I can't--I just can't discuss blood and babies and the danger of teen boys' wandering hands over frozen Eggos at seven in the morning. But I gotta get this back home to her before I go back to the station."

"Hop, she's probably scared to death."

"I promised her she wasn't dying. I said it was normal."

Joyce sighs, but can't help smiling. Sometimes it bowls her over, the way she and Jim Hopper are still standing here conversing as if nothing between them has ever changed, as if they're still sharing a study hall smoke break behind Hawkins High, when the interim has been nothing but chaos: her and Lonnie, him and Diane, Sara dying, Will disappearing, broken phones, blinking lights, tunnels, monsters, Eleven. Bob. Her smile fades and she has to rub the back of her hand across her eyes to hinder the sudden threat of a tear.

"Do...do you want me to talk to her instead?" she hears herself saying. "You can bring her over tonight. We can all have dinner together."

Hop looks surprised for a moment, as surprised as Joyce is herself. She's been able to go through the motions all right thus far, on a day-

to-day basis. She has to, for the sake of her boys. But the Byers household is one thing--her nest, her sphere of control, where she can bury herself under the covers if the sorrow begins to suffocate her. Where she doesn't have to let anyone else in now. Letting them in only causes more sorrow in the long term.

But Eleven--*Jane*--is a girl without a mother's guidance, and Hop, bless him and his best efforts, couldn't fill that role.

"Uh...sure, of course," Hop says, removing his hat for a moment, idly shaking it out, then looking confused and putting it on again. "Yeah, that would be great. You want me to bring anything?"

Joyce laughs at the mental image of him attempting to prepare a side dish when he could seldom accomplish more than frozen waffles and Swanson's TV dinners. "Just your daughter. And you can bring the smokes for afterward."